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Israel Advocacy With A Wink

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We hope to interview Daniella soon for our podcast radio show. Until then here is a piece on Daniella and her amazing web site.



A new website called Chelm-on-the-Med© Online gives an entirely different ‘take’ on Israel. Based on genuine man-bite-dog news items gleaned from Israel’s Hebrew

newspapers, the author – veteran American-Israeli journalist Daniella Ashkenazy says she’s convinced that others – whatever their stripe – “will be laughing *with* us, not *at* us.”

Umpteen websites, posters, books and op-eds try to change Israel’s dismal image through serious advocacy. Israeli freelance journalist Daniella Ashkenazy thinks she can change perceptions using Jews’ oldest and most effective weapon. Humor.

Her [Chelm-on-the-Med© Online](#) website – sporting a winking Israeli flag logo – is filled with man-bite-dog stories and back page news ‘hiding’ in the Hebrew press that never make the news abroad, not even ‘soft news’ sites specializing in offbeat news such as Reuters *Oddly Enough*.



The website offers regular columns, (twice a month, with plans to go weekly) of short vignettes written tongue-in-cheek – stories that indeed all-too-often sounds like a modern-day Chelm – an actual Jewish town in Poland that for generations served as the butt of Yiddish folk humor, tagged with the role of being ‘a paradise filled with life-embracing fools’.

“The difference is, I’m not making this up,” says Ashkenazy, “I’m not even exaggerating.”

Ashkenazy’s classics stories include a raw Israeli recruit in the IDF whose ultimate Jewish mother snuck into boot camp every night to accompany her son the soldier on guard duty because he was afraid of the dark – slipping out undetected at dawn; another young man who served three years of conscript service as ‘IDF magician’; and a third who was an “ORGANizer” – responsible for urging soldiers to sign and carry organ donor cards. Ashkenazy believes knowing about the crazy things that go on in the IDF – including a conscript who spent three years hiding his shoulder-length dreadlocks from the brass with the help of his CO and half the base – helps break down stereotypes that brand Israel a ‘militaristic’ country.

Israel's traditional response to Palestinian victimology that brands Israel as an aggressor and oppressor has been to provide context or counter with pictures of Israeli suffering – tactics that have inherent weaknesses, she charges. Israel needs to challenge powerful Palestinian imagery by “changing the rules of the imagery war” with other powerful albeit funny images that are just as unforgettable.

A end-of-year news roundup of [‘Wild and wacky Israeli tales from ‘09](#) released by the Jewish Telegraphic Agency (JTA) in late December contains just that kind of story: an IDF infantry unit pushing into Gaza during the Cast Lead campaign hunkered down in an abandoned Rafiah zoo only to find themselves saddled with two thoroughly frightened and very famished lions. The soldiers' cans of battle rations would hardly fill the tummy of a hungry lion. Ashkenazy is convinced that this image – amplified by an appropriate humorous illustration or animation and distributed as postcards on campus and by other means – will automatically pop into viewers' minds the next time they hear the word “Cast Lead” – not just images of Palestinian casualties or phosphorus smoke hanging over Gaza.

Ashkenazy – a veteran journalist who for over two decades has written for the *Jerusalem Post* and many other Hebrew and English media, who worked in serious advocacy for 3½ years as chief researcher and writer for [Myths and Facts](#) — says that “odd news from Israel can reach out to people in Middle America — the overwhelming majority of Americans who don't read the op-ed page and are beyond in-depth advocacy circles or serious argumentation.”



“This is a new demographic of readers for Israeli advocacy content who can laugh with Israel as an amusing and slightly nutty place just like everywhere else.”

Ashkenazy argues that Chelm-on-the-Med© can make Israel ‘cool’ and ‘funky’ and ‘funny’ for kids, as well – combating the image of a somber and dangerous place that focus groups have found among American youth. “Kids will love the story about unknown entrepreneurs who one August ‘took over’ an empty parking garage in the heart of Tel Aviv and set up an open-air disco that attracted thousands of youngsters, then vanished into the heat of the

night with the take. Or the week a strange form of graffiti by practically-unidentified pranksters began appearing on park benches along swank Rothschild Boulevard in Tel-Aviv – little engraved plaques declaring “Amnon's Bench” or ‘Hilah's and El'ad's Bench’,” says Ashkenazy.

“Israel advocacy activist can use the content. The power of humor in education is well documented. Stories can also be used to defuse detractors and neutralize hecklers with laughter, she says

Synagogues newsletters and even regular commercial print media can reprint a limited number of vignettes in their publications free of cost. When Ashkenazy says “no one's stock perceptions will survive intact” she says that ranges from Israel bashers to Jews who care deeply about Israel but often view Israel through a narrow lens, as well. She says knowledge of Israel as “a *real* place with its own silly politicians, crazy laws, two-bit crooks and other nutty and nervy characters, in fact, will be enriching and reassuring, even empowering – a much needed source of comic relief.” Other derivatives beyond the website are planned — including a book anthology and offering Chelm-like material to Jewish television stations as an upbeat and offbeat conclusion to news broadcasts from and about Israel.

Life in Israel is far more human and life-embracing than the headlines reveal, she concludes: “Reading about a senior Israeli minister who chose to enchant the press by mesmerizing a chicken, leaving the bird on its back looking like an oversized zapped cockroach or reading about a court ruling on a divorce settlement requiring the divorcee pay his former spouse one pregnant goat a year for the next 35 years – raising serious questions over ‘who got whose goat’ – I'm convinced non-Israelis will be laughing *with* us...not *at* us.”